

Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics

On the Self-Knowledge Argument for Cognitive Phenomenology

M.A. Parks

University of California, Davis

Biography

M.A. Parks is a Ph.D. student and Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Philosophy Department at the University of California, Davis. They received a B.A. in philosophy and psychology from the University of Michigan, Flint in 2014, and an M.A. in philosophy from Wayne State University in 2016. Their primary research interests are in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and metaphysics more generally.

Publication Details

Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics (ISSN: 2166-5087). March, 2019. Volume 6, Issue 1.

Citation

Parks, M.A. 2019. "On the Self-Knowledge Argument for Cognitive Phenomenology." *Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* 6 (1): 91–102.

On the Self-Knowledge Argument for Cognitive Phenomenology

M.A. Parks

Abstract

The present paper will be primarily concerned with criticizing the defense of cognitive phenomenology presented by David Pitt's (2011) self knowledge argument, focusing on his response to Joseph Levine (2011). In this essay, I argue that Pitt's self-knowledge argument appears to presuppose that a person makes voluntary judgments about their beliefs on the basis of recognition of distinctive phenomenal states, the way we recognize what we see, hear, or smell. However, many of those who reject the existence of cognitive phenomenology (e.g., those who endorse Non-Phenomenal Functional Representationalism) would deny this assumption. Thus, I argue Pitt's self-knowledge arguments do not seem to be as general as may have been intended, as only a relatively narrow audience who already endorse Pitt's controversial assumptions will find the arguments convincing. However, while Pitt is unable to argue decisively that there exists a distinctive cognitive phenomenology, the same might be said of Levine's argument that no cognitive phenomenology is required to explain how a person comes to have knowledge of her thoughts.¹ I attempt to offer a defense of Levine's account of self-knowledge of one's thoughts, but I ultimately suggest that the literature surrounding the self-knowledge argument for cognitive phenomenology appears to collapse into an argumentative impasse, as both sides appear to rely on controversial assumptions that their opponents take to be false. In the last section of this essay, I discuss the implications of these conclusions.

Keywords

Cognitive, Phenomenology, Phenomenal, Intentionality, Representationalism

I. Introduction

According to advocates of cognitive phenomenology, there is something it is like to have an occurrent thought, in addition to any sensory phenomenology which may also accompany it. I will follow Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague (2011) in referring to those who believe in the existence of non-sensory cognitive phenomenology as liberals, whereas those who believe the only kind of phenomenal states are sensory (where sensory is understood broadly) are known as conservatives.

While the preceding may suffice for a first-pass attempt at distinguishing between the different views one might hold about cognitive phenomenology, there appear to

1. This is the case insofar as Levine's opponents will not accept his assumptions.

be many different varieties of cognitive phenomenology discussed in the literature. For example, Levine (2011) suggests that there is a distinction between pure and impure cognitive phenomenology. Levine says of impure cognitive phenomenology: “what one is thinking changes the way what one is perceiving (imagining, etc.) appears to one, but in the end all phenomenology involves the appearance of some sensorily presented object and its qualities” (Levine 2011, 112).² On the other hand, one might think of cognitive phenomenology in a pure sense, such that “independently of any sensory phenomenology, and not strictly through its effect on one’s sensory phenomenology, there is just something it is like to think a thought with a certain content” (ibid). This seems to be the sort of cognitive phenomenology defended by Pitt.³ Moreover, given Carruthers and Veillet’s (2011) distinction between constitutive versus causal contributions, I take it that any version of Impure Cognitive Phenomenology suggests that thoughts do not “make a constitutive contribution to the phenomenal properties of events in which they are embedded” (Carruthers and Veillet 2011, 37), and thus Impure Cognitive Phenomenology does not seem to count as a genuine form of cognitive phenomenology at all, and thus will be set aside for the remainder of this paper.⁴

There are many who deny the existence of pure cognitive phenomenology (e.g., see Carruthers and Veillet 2011). Non-Phenomenal Functional Representationalism (NPFR) advocates, for example, hold the following:

...as on any functionalist-representationalist view, the mind is a representational system, with representational states embodied in physical configurations in the brain. Thinking is a matter of tokening certain “mentalese” sentences and processing them in various ways. The

2. This seems consistent with Prinz’s (2011) suggestion that the phenomenology of propositional attitudes be understood in terms of sensory phenomenology, broadly construed.

3. Levine also distinguishes between two additional views:

CPTC (TC=Transparent Content): “what the cognitive state is about, what it’s representing, constitutes the “look” as it were of the cognitive state” (Levine 2011, 113).

CPOC (OC= Opaque Content): “...rather than presenting a content, what is presented is one’s own mental state; on a representational theory of mind, what is presented is the underlying mental representation that is the immediate relatum of the cognitive attitude in question...[which] allows that there is more than the sensory experience of inner speech and imagery, but claims that this something more is still analogous to the sensory phenomenology of inner speech in that it is a kind of cognitive ‘hearing’ of underlying mental representations” (ibid).

4. A more thorough discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

different attitudes are constituted by different functional relations to the relevant mentalese sentences, and the different contents toward which one can take an attitude are determined by the semantic properties of the mentalese sentences. These semantic properties are determined by causal or nomic relations to the world, and also (perhaps) by functional relations among the sentences themselves... *[Additionally, unlike certain perceptual states], there is no corresponding phenomenal character experienced as a result of occupying even occurrent cognitive states* (Levine 2011, 105; emphasis added).

The present paper will be concerned with addressing the liberal view of cognitive phenomenology developed by Pitt (2011), focusing particularly on his response to the NPFR view defended by Levine (2011). I will argue that Pitt assumes that people make voluntary judgments about their beliefs on the basis of recognition of a distinctive phenomenology of thought, the way a person recognizes what she sees, hears, or smells. However, conservatives about the cognitive phenomenology debate (e.g., those who endorse Non-Phenomenal Functional Representationalism) would deny this assumption. Thus, Pitt's arguments do not seem to be as general as may have been intended.

II. Pitt, Levine, and the Self-Knowledge Argument

Levine argues that neither the self-knowledge argument nor the phenomenological argument imply the truth of pure cognitive phenomenology of any sort. He suggests that the phenomenological argument only supports Impure Cognitive Phenomenology, since "it is possible, for all the argument demonstrates, that the only way for a cognitive content to make itself appear to a conscious subject is through affecting the way some sensory manifold appears" (Levine 2011, 116).⁵ Moreover, Levine argues that as it was presented, the self-knowledge argument also does not support any pure version of cognitive phenomenology, as "no version of [cognitive phenomenology] is necessitated by the phenomenon of self-knowledge of content[; NPFR does just fine]" (Levine 2011, 117).⁶

5. Moreover, it only supports CPOC, as "for all that's manifest to us, merely by noting [the difference between 1) hearing a sentence one doesn't understand and 2) hearing a sentence one does understand], what we are responding to is the difference between the representational states we're occupying in the two circumstances" (Levine 2011, 116).

6. Levine goes on to argue that the indubitability of self-knowledge of content would support Impure CPOC, "though whether we have such self-knowledge of content is itself dubitable" (Levine 2011, 119). However,

However, Pitt offers a variation of the self-knowledge argument which he believes is immune to Levine's criticisms: a person has 'Immediate' knowledge of what she is thinking, in the sense that she can "consciously, introspectively, and non-inferentially" identify each of her thoughts as the particular thought it is, in addition to distinguishing between her occurrent thoughts and 1) other occurrent mental states and 2) her other occurrent thoughts (Pitt 2004, 7-8). Pitt argues that the only way a person can have such knowledge is if our thoughts have a kind of cognitive phenomenology which is individuated, proprietary and distinct (ibid).

Levine considers an alternative mentalese-based account (MBA) of how a person can have self-knowledge of what she is thinking, which is consistent with Non-Phenomenal Functional Representationalism:

What it is to have knowledge of what one is thinking is to token a mental representation – a mentalese sentence – that expresses the fact that one is thinking what one is thinking. What makes this Immediate knowledge, in Pitt's sense, is the fact that this sentence tokening is not the result of an inferential process, but rather an immediate causal result of the first-order thought state itself (together with some functionally characterizable internal monitoring process). It's because of the reliability of the relevant process yielding the higher-order sentence expressing the fact that one is thinking a certain content that it counts as knowledge (Levine 2011, 106-107).

Levine goes on to Pitt's (2004) objections to MBA, but he argues that they ultimately fail. Pitt's first objection is as follows:

To think that *t* is the thought that *p* while *t* is occurring – even because *t* is occurring – is not to identify it as the thought that *p* in the sense at issue in this paper. Introspective identification of occurrent conscious thoughts is analogous to perceptual identification of objects and introspective identification of sensations: it is a form of knowledge by acquaintance...the object identified – "this" – must be experientially discriminated by the perceiver from its environment [and this requires that the object appear to one in some determinate way] (Pitt 2004, 19).

the present paper will be concerned with cognitive phenomenology understood in the pure sense.

Levine argues that this response begs the question: “If one insists that our “conscious” knowledge of what we’re currently thinking is a matter of perceptual-like acquaintance -comparable to how I know what I’m seeing or feeling- then I guess it must involve phenomenal character” (Levine 2011, 108). So, Pitt is allegedly building phenomenal character into the kind of knowledge intended to be explained, but if one refrains from doing so, “then Pitt’s objection seems to disappear” (ibid).

Pitt’s second objection is as follows:

...*t*’ is a higher-order thought to the effect that thought *t* has content *p*], *t*’ ’s consciousness is supposed to make the content of *t* Immediately knowable...because the content of *t*’ is that the content of *t* is *p*... [So] conscious occurrence of *t*’ must, if it is to be sufficient to ground Immediate knowledge of the content of *t*, be sufficient to ground conscious knowledge of its own content as well. Since the theory under consideration denies this, it is false (Pitt 2004, 20).

Levine responds to this objection by appealing to a distinction between explicit self-knowledge and implicit self-knowledge, where the former involves formulating metacognitive thoughts such as “I believe that *P*” (Levine 2011, 108) and the latter does not. Implicit self-knowledge of one’s thoughts comes from a person thinking in mentalese. On the other hand, explicit knowledge of one’s thoughts involves a distinct cognitive state, “to token the right representation in the appropriate circumstances. To explicitly know thought *t*’s content is to think another thought, *t*’ whose content is that the content of *t* is *p* and is itself implicitly known. On NPFR, it’s tokening and processing all the way down” (Levine 2011, 109).

Pitt (2011) argues in response that implicit self-knowledge does not adequately explain how a person knows what she is thinking.⁷ He suggests that “mere occurrence of a mental state can’t constitute conscious implicit self-knowledge unless the occurrence is itself conscious, and consciousness requires phenomenology. [...] You can’t have implicit conscious knowledge of what you’re thinking in virtue of tokening an unconscious mental representation” (Pitt 2011, 146-147). Levine disagrees.

Pitt goes on to offer a further argument that “sometimes [a person comes] to have a belief about what [they’re] experiencing on the basis of attending to it and recognizing what it is” (Pitt 2011, 150), done voluntarily as opposed to automatically.

7. Levine suggests that this might be due to differences between how he and Pitt are using the term ‘conscious’.

One recognizes what one is thinking - just as one recognizes what one is hearing or smelling or seeing - and applies the relevant concepts and forms the relevant beliefs. The recognition is neither conceptual nor inferential and the formation of the relevant beliefs, while of course conceptual, isn't inferential either.[...]We make *voluntary* judgments about the contents of our consciousness on the basis of recognition of their distinctive phenomenologies. We're consciously aware, not just *that* we're in a particular conscious state, but *of* the state itself. Sometimes I come to have a belief about what I'm experiencing on the basis of attending to it and recognizing what it is...Maybe there's a reflex "I'm in pain!" that pops into my head when something hurts me. But I can also, so to speak, browse around in my conscious mind (selectively attend to the contents of my consciousness) and attend to things that are there (the song that's been in my head all day, the ringing in my ears, the thought that I'm condemned to be free). I may or may not form the thought that I'm in any of these states; but if I do, it seems that I can do it *voluntarily*- just as I might absent-mindedly (thoughtlessly) be looking at an orange flower, and then think to myself: "That's an orange flower." [Levine's] seemingly automatic belief-forming mechanism story can't explain this. (Pitt 2011, 150)

III. Evaluating Pitt's Appeal to 'Voluntary Formation of Thoughts'

The argument reflected in the preceding passage seems to be something along the lines of the following:

1. If Levine's NPFR/MBA account is correct, then all of our beliefs are formed by an automatic-belief forming mechanism.
2. If we make voluntary judgments on the basis of recognition of the distinctive phenomenologies of thoughts, then our beliefs are not formed by an automatic-belief forming mechanism.
3. We make voluntary judgments about our beliefs on the basis of recognition of their distinctive phenomenologies, the way we recognize what we see, hear, or smell.
4. Therefore, beliefs are not formed by an automatic-belief forming mechanism.
5. Therefore, Levine's NPFR/MBA account cannot be correct.

Contrary to what Pitt seems to suggest, NPFR doesn't necessarily presuppose that belief-formation automatically occurs in some necessarily non-voluntary way. Rather, "that one is thinking what one is thinking...[is] an immediate causal result of the first-order thought state itself (together with some functionally characterizable internal monitoring process). It's because of the reliability of the relevant process yielding the higher-order sentence expressing the fact that one is thinking a certain content that it counts as knowledge" (Levine 2011, 107). Pitt argues that this "reliable, automatic belief-forming mechanism" (Pitt 2011, 150) is distinct from the process of voluntary belief formation. However, this functionally characterizable internal monitoring process seems consistent with presupposing that belief-formation isn't always 'automatic'; a person may look at a painting for some period of time before thinking, 'This flower is beautiful' (and there may sometimes be something like a feeling of 'voluntariness', which may be explained in terms of sensory phenomenology). Short of presupposing that intentionality is grounded in phenomenality, which Levine would deny, there appears to be no reason to think that Levine's account cannot explain 'voluntary belief-formation' in this sense.

Moreover, whereas Pitt seems to assume something like (3) is true, this is inconsistent with the NPFR view defended by Levine. Insofar as Pitt endorses (3), he is presupposing the existence of cognitive phenomenology, and since he does not take his argument to be circular, he seems to hold that there is independent reason for thinking (3) is true. This would be the case if Pitt endorsed some version of phenomenal intentionality or PIT (the Phenomenal Intentionality Theory). Believing in the Phenomenal Intentionality Theory seems to be one possible motivating factor for believing in premise 3 of the argument, and it has been described as follows:

The phenomenal intentionality theory (PIT) is a theory of intentionality, the aboutness of mental states. While many contemporary theories of intentionality attempt to account for intentionality in terms of causal relations, informational relations, functional roles, or other "naturalistic" ingredients, PIT aims to account for it in terms of phenomenal consciousness, the felt, subjective, or "what it's like" (Nagel 1974) aspect of mental life. According to PIT, the key ingredient giving rise to intentional states is phenomenal consciousness. Pautz (2013) describes PIT as taking a "consciousness first" approach to intentionality, since it claims that consciousness grounds or is explanatorily prior to intentionality. Kriegel (2011, 2013) describes the approach as one on which consciousness is the "source" of intentionality; consciousness

“injects” intentionality into the world. [...] According to PIT, intentional states and phenomenal states are intimately related. Some phenomenal states are inherently intentional, and all intentional states are either phenomenal states or importantly related to phenomenal states. (Bourget and Mendelovici 2017, Section I).

Given this characterization of the Phenomenal Intentionality Theory, it seems that PIT seems to imply some of Pitt’s controversial premises, such as premise 3 in the argument developed in the previous section. If intentional states such as occurrent thoughts are taken to be grounded in phenomenal states, then it seems that phenomenal states would be required for occurrent thoughts; unfortunately for Pitt, endorsement of the Phenomenal Intentionality Theory is not widespread, and moreover, “[t]he reductive versions of representationalism [defended by Levine] and PIT [endorsed by Pitt] are incompatible: if consciousness reduces to intentionality, their intentionality does not reduce to consciousness, and vice-versa” (Bourget and Mendelovici 2017, Section 3.2).

Thus, it seems Pitt’s argument relies on a controversial premise, (3), which seems to follow from something like the Phenomenal Intentionality Theory. Whatever Pitt’s motivation for assuming (3), others such as reductive representationalists would not grant this assumption, and thus have reason to reject the conclusion of Pitt’s argument. Thus, Pitt’s argument is not going to convince as wide of an audience as may have been intended; instead, only those who have independent reasons for thinking assumption (3) is true will agree that Pitt’s argument is sound.

However, a liberal about cognitive phenomenology might argue that Levine is in no better position than Pitt, insofar as NPFR is ultimately defended by principles his opponents would not accept; for example, Pitt rejects the claim that one can simply know what they are thinking without any cognitive phenomenology. However, this appears to reflect a deeper disagreement between opponents in the cognitive phenomenology debate: those who are committed to the Phenomenal Intentionality Thesis are committed to intentional states being grounded in phenomenal states, which is consistent with Pitt’s claim that ‘we make judgments about our beliefs on the basis of recognition of their distinctive phenomenologies, the way we recognize what we see, hear, or smell.’ However, opponents of PIT such as representationalists believe this claim is false; therefore, more work needs to be done to clarify the significance of prior commitments to views such as PIT or NPFR and any relationships these bear to arguments put forth in the cognitive phenomenology debate.

IV. On Pitt's Criticism of Byrne

A defender of Pitt's argument might respond by bringing up a related problem for Levine's view which Pitt attributes to Byrne (Pitt 2011, 159). Byrne (2005) attempts to explain how a person comes to know what she believes via the application (or attempted application of) some transparent epistemic rule like 'If p , then believe that you think that p .' Pitt argues that "application of BEL presupposes the knowledge it's supposed to generate: the theory is viciously circular" (Pitt 2011, 157).

Pitt then considers (and dismisses) the following possible response on Byrne's behalf:

It might be objected that one need not recognize that one is in proper circumstances for application of BEL in order to apply it and come to know what one believes, because its application is automatic: whenever you're in the right circumstances of recognizing that p , some mechanism that implements BEL is activated, and forthwith you believe that you believe that p . Simply being in the proper circumstances is sufficient to trigger the relevant mechanisms. (Pitt 2011, 157)

Pitt rejects this possible line of response, as he suggests Byrne is not trying to explain automatic processes, but rather, voluntary ones, and that this response allegedly cannot explain how one voluntarily forms the thought that they are hoping, desiring, etc. with respect to p without already having knowledge of said mental state (Pitt 2011, 157-158). Similarly, one might argue that Levine's account of how a person has knowledge of her thoughts (sometimes voluntarily) would require the person to already have the knowledge which is supposed to be generated.

However, the NPFR account can appeal to the "functionally characterizable internal monitoring process" (Levine 2011, 107) and other states involved in mentalesse sentence-tokening seems to possibly account for both the content of a person's thought and whether it is hoped, believed, doubted, etc. For example, the phenomenology of such propositional attitudes can be understood by conservatives as sensory (Prinz 2011). Insofar as that is the case, it does not seem that Pitt's (2011) criticism of Byrne (2005) applies to Levine's (2011) view; the NPFR view is not viciously circular.

V. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Pitt (2011) responds to Levine (2011) by arguing that cognitive phenomenology is required to explain knowledge of one's thoughts, in particular, the voluntary formation of thoughts. However, advocates of NPFR would not agree with all of the assumptions underlying Pitt's argument, as the assumption that we make voluntary judgments about

our beliefs on the basis of recognition of their distinctive phenomenologies, the way we recognize what we see, hear, or smell is inconsistent with NPFR. Thus, while Pitt's argument shows that cognitive phenomenology may be required if one endorses some version of the phenomenal intentionality thesis, it gives no reason for Levine or other NPFR advocates to believe in cognitive phenomenology, so the argument may be in that sense relatively weak.⁸

A liberal about cognitive phenomenology might press the issue, and argue that Levine is in no better position than Pitt, insofar as Levine's view is ultimately defended by principles his opponents would not accept; for example, Pitt rejects Levine's position that one can simply know what they are thinking without any cognitive phenomenology. Moreover, Maja Spener (2011) argues that with respect to the phenomenological argument for cognitive phenomenology, both parties should be conciliatory instead of steadfast; given this, one might argue that conciliationism would also be appropriate given the conclusions about the force of the self-knowledge argument established in previous sections. These assumptions might be taken to imply that conservatives (and perhaps liberals too) should become less certain of the truth of their views.

However, there is no good reason to expand the number of different types of phenomenology beyond sensory phenomenology, broadly construed. As Prinz (2011) argues, "cognitive phenomenology can be exhaustively accommodated by the phenomenology of inner speech and sensory simulations of what our thoughts represents" (Prinz 2011, 190). That is, every purported case of non-sensory cognitive phenomenology is such that it can potentially be explained in terms of a sensory-based phenomenology, and there is no clear case of so-called cognitive phenomenology which is obviously distinguishable from sensory states. This seems to put the onus on liberals to provide decisive arguments in favor of the existence of cognitive phenomenology. As it stands, the self-knowledge argument fails to do so.

References

- Bourget, David and Mendelovici, Angela. 2017. "Phenomenal Intentionality." In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by E. N. Zalta.
- Byrne, Alex. 2005. "Intentionalism Defended." *Philosophical Topics* 33: 79–104.

8. I believe similar considerations may apply to discussions of other arguments for cognitive phenomenology, such as in the case of phenomenal contrast arguments, but a thorough discussion of that topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

- Carruthers, Peter. & Veillet, Bénédicte. 2011. "The Case against Cognitive Phenomenology," in *Cognitive Phenomenology*, edited by Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, 35–56. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kriegel, Uriah. 2011. *The Sources of Intentionality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kriegel, Uriah. 2013. "Phenomenal Intentionality Past and Present: Introductory." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 12 (3): 437–444.
- Levine, Joseph. 2011. "On the Phenomenology of Thought." In *Cognitive Phenomenology*, edited by Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, 103–120. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1974. "What is it Like to be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* LXXXIII (4): 435–450.
- Pautz, Adam. 2013. "Does Phenomenology Ground Mental Content?" In *Phenomenal Intentionality*, edited by Uriah Kriegel, 194–234. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pitt, David. 2004. "The Phenomenology of Cognition, Or, What it is Like to Think that P?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69: 1–36.
- Pitt, David. 2011. "Introspection, Phenomenality, and Content." In *Cognitive Phenomenology*, edited by Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, 141–173. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prinz, Jesse. 2011. "The Sensory Basis of Cognitive Phenomenology." In *Cognitive Phenomenology*, edited by Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, 174–196. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spener, Maja. 2011. "Disagreement about Cognitive Phenomenology." In *Cognitive Phenomenology*, edited by Tim Bayne and Michelle Montague, 268–284. Oxford: Oxford University Press.